March 23, 2020 Emergency Leadership Team Meeting Teleconference Report

Attendees

Steve Peters, Oris Friesen, Henry Goldberg, Mark Goldstein, Omar Alam, Michael Amick, Melissa Armas, Bob Jacobson, John Kelly, Derek Masseth, Mala Muralidharan, Lea Marquez Peterson, Alan Pruitt, Jeff Sobotka, Dan Stormont, Graham Taylor, Nan Williams, Karen Ziegler

Emergency AZBSN Leadership Team Meeting for COVID-19 Crisis

Steve explained he called this emergency AZBSN Leadership Team meeting to discuss how the AZBSN could help with the state response to the lack of broadband and technology availability for students and the overall population as schools and employers have closed their buildings to prevent spread of the coronavirus, and people are required to work from home or other locations. Steve stated that there are various federal/state/local initiatives being considered or beginning to roll out, and the AZBSN can play an important role in enabling collaboration among key players, sharing important information, and developing priorities and creative strategies for the most effective state response.

Arizona Corporation Commission Initiative

Commissioner Lea Marquez Peterson described activities she is leading regarding telecom at the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC) to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

On March 16th, the ACC held a special open meeting to ask the telecommunications service providers and the electric/gas/water utilities they regulate to present their crisis preparedness plans. Commissioner Peterson asked the 20 Class A and B telecommunications service providers that are subject to ACC jurisdiction to clarify the broadband services that will enable residential and business customers to operate remotely by answering the following questions (responses to be published on the ACC Docket AU-00000A-20-0050):

- Has your organization committed to removing data caps for business and residential customers?

- Is your company committed to complying with the FCC's "Keep Americans Connected Pledge"?

- Will the public have free use of your company's Wi-Fi hot spots in Arizona? Have you considered relocating your hot spots with a focus on underserved communities in the state?

- What percentage of your company's broadband capacity is utilized during non-emergency times? What are your expectations for capacity utilization during the crisis?

- Does your company have additional capacity that it can add as needs grow? is this at an additional cost to customers?

- What percentage of employees or departments within your organization will be working remotely during the crisis? Will any services be interrupted during the crisis? How will you ensure excellent customer service during this time?

- How can your organization ensure that 9-1-1 services will not be interrupted during this crisis?

- How is your organization coordinating with businesses / government agencies that are creating a remote workforce (assistance with VPN, Firewalls)?

- Are there any programs your organization can provide to schools or students in your region (at no additional cost) to ensure a smooth transition to learning at home?

- How is your organization communicating with your customers during this crisis?

- Is your organization offering a "low cost" program for low income families?

Commissioner Peterson commented that CenturyLink stated it is currently operating at 46% capacity on its network. She expects more of an update on March 24th from other service providers, with expected responses from all Class A & B providers.

Steve stated he would like to get a list with contact information of all the Internet service providers in the state including the large ones that the ACC regulates.

State Broadband Director Activities and Related Comments

Jeff Sobotka, the State Broadband Director at the Arizona Commerce Authority (ACA), discussed his activities in responding to the crisis.

Jeff stated his role is to encourage telecommunications service providers to offer appropriate broadband services for those lacking broadband, as opposed to the regulatory role of the ACC. He has spoken to all of the wireline and wireless service providers in the state, including the three largest wireless service providers AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile.

Jeff explained that the solutions will be different from market-to-market, and there is no "one size fits all" solution. Some rural communities don't have adequate broadband infrastructure. Some cable companies can open up their public Wi-Fi hotspots for everyone to access. A lot of schools and libraries have new broadband infrastructure available from the E-rate program funding, and this may be the only broadband connectivity available in the community. CenturyLink has offered to open up its rural backbone network capacity for use by other service providers such as wireless providers.

Jeff stated he looks forward to working with the ACC and AZBSN going forward. The ACA is establishing a COVID-19 webpage in addition to their existing Broadband webpage.

Derek Masseth (Executive Director of the Sun Corridor Network and Chief Technology Officer of the University of Arizona) commented that the universities and community colleges are concerned with the issue of how the rural students sent home can obtain connectivity for their coursework. Jeff responded that there should be dialogue with Milan Eaton and Mala Muralidharan, the E-rate administrators for schools and libraries respectively, about whether Wi-Fi access can be enabled for these students from parking lots at their local schools/libraries.

Mala Muralidharan explained that 222 library buildings across the state have newly-established broadband service enabled by the E-rate program including Wi-Fi access. The problem is that 50% of these have now turned off their Wi-Fi access because of security/vandalism concerns, and the State Library is trying to address this problem.

Steve Peters asked about state and federal funding available for short-term solutions for those that don't have broadband access at home. Jeff responded that there is no special funding established by the state for this yet, and the federal government is loosening regulations on the E-rate program to address this. He will let the AZBSN Leadership Team know about new federal funding programs that become available. Jeff summarized that the approach should be to consider 1) short-term solutions with what is available now; 2) mid-term solutions that augment what can be done with new options that come available; and 3) long-term solutions that require plans and funding for new broadband infrastructure.

Melissa Armas, Founder of the Arizona Blockchain Initiative, explained her non-profit organization trains under-served people to use Internet and technology for their careers. They have created a program to provide hotspots at seven high schools in the Phoenix area that have fiber access to the Internet. She says they could extend this solution relatively quickly to other schools that have E-rate funding to allocate for this. They are proposing a budget for the hardware and installation costs to accomplish this for the Phoenix school district. Jeff says this could be a valuable approach for rural schools as well since CenturyLink can provide wholesale backbone network capacity but does not get involved in the hotspot business.

Henry Goldberg commented that smart phones enabled as mobile hotspots at home are an important solution to consider because most people have smart phones and these smart-phone hotspots could flexibly allow the students and parents to all access the Internet from their homes for education, work, telemedicine etc. He remarked this would be more flexible and convenient for the entire family and not require students/adults to access Wi-Fi from their school or library parking lots. Jeff responded that this issue would need to be discussed with wireless service providers to see if they have the network capacity to handle this.

Steve added that companies like Cox and Viasat are making available their public Wi-Fi hotspots to anyone who needs them.

Mala Muralidharan explained the State Library is a member of SHLB (Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition), which has sent a letter to the FCC on various recommendations for enabling broadband access in this crisis (this letter has been distributed to the AZBSN Leadership Team). Subsequently, the FCC has waived the gift rules for E-rate, which will allow service providers to donate mobile hotspots and increase bandwidth at various locations. The company Kajeet has a large inventory of mobile hotspots (from Verizon) that have a good filter appropriate for student use. Karen Ziegler remarked that Kajeet's hotspot inventory is not likely adequate to serve all Arizona rural communities, and that smart-phone enabled hotspots could supplement this if the service providers supported this at no charge. Jeff stated the service providers will need to examine whether there is adequate backhaul capacity in communities if everyone accesses the Internet at the same time.

Karen Ziegler added the Arizona Department of Administration had a $30 million school bus program to replace old school buses with new ones that are Wi-Fi enabled. She will look further into the details of this program. Mala Muralidahran added the libraries have distributed around 1000 laptops around the state, and book mobiles are also a consideration. Mark Goldstein remarked that a program could be established to collect donated equipment and that neighbors could share Wi-Fi access.

Bob Jacobson asked if there is an organization that communicates with cities and counties. Steve responded that the Arizona League of Cities & Towns and County Supervisors Association do this. We have a long standing relationship with them..

Steve summarized saying the AZBSN could catalogue all the available solutions/resources for remote Internet access for individuals/communities lacking it, and he sees the potential for various funders of this work. He will be working with Jeff on how this should be constructed. This catalogue may be posted on the AZBSN or ACA websites or both – Mark Goldstein remarked this could be duplicated on various sites or with links to appropriate information. Mark added that the AZBSN role of facilitating communication among various relevant stakeholders is valuable. Jeff supported holding more AZBSN meetings to enable this.

Next Steps

Steve will be coordinating regular AZBSN Leadership Team emergency meetings to make rapid progress on this work during the COVID-19 crisis. The next meetings will be on Friday March 27th and Monday March 30th at 7:30 am, and on Monday mornings after that in April with other ad-hoc meetings as needed.

Steve will stay in contact with Lea Marquez Peterson, Jeff Sobotka, and Karen Ziegler to catalogue service providers' new solutions to this crisis.   Mark Goldstein added that Andy Tobin, Director of the Arizona Dept. of Administration, will also be an important person to communicate with on this effort. Steve stated a key issue will be how to communicate with service providers during this crisis.

Henry Goldberg and Oris Friesen will write up a summary report of today's leadership team meeting.